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SUBJECT: Ambassador Meets Mouride Caliph

REF: Dakar 226

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a meeting with Serigne Bara Lamine Mbacke, the Caliph-General (or grand marabout) of Senegal's powerful Mouride Muslim brotherhood, the Ambassador requested help to end child trafficking and child begging and discussed transparency in government and the fight against corruption, the situation in the Casamance and reproductive health. She also commended religious leaders for their role in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Senegal and asked for the Caliph to exert similar influence in addressing these issues. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In an unusually long meeting with the 84-year-old leader of the Mouride Muslim brotherhood, the Ambassador requested the Caliph's support to end child begging and the trafficking of children by unscrupulous marabouts (religious guides) for the purposes of begging. The Caliph, who rarely speaks, asked his cousin and long time Embassy contact, Mame Mor Mbacke, CEO of the Al Ahzar group that includes dozens of bilingual (French/Arabic) in Senegal, to respond on his behalf (Note: The Caliph-General often responds via intermediaries, rather than expressing his opinion directly because of the potential impact of his words in Senegalese society. End note). Mame Mor underlined that Mouridism focuses both on acquiring a strong religious education and promoting strong work ethics and that begging was contrary to both of those tenets. He remarked that while Touba is the country's second most populous city it has no industry and no major companies and yet people do not beg.

¶3. (SBU) On the issue of transparency, the Caliph nodded while the Ambassador discussed good governance and the fight against corruption. (Comment: The Caliph, who tends to stay out of politics as much as possible while maintaining a great deal of political influence, probably did not comment due to the sensitive nature of the topic that is currently at the heart of the political debate, with both civil society and opponents focusing on the fight against corruption and calling for President Abdoulaye Wade to step down as a precondition for increasing transparency and good governance in Senegal. End Comment)

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador then raised the very sensitive issue of reproductive health, noting that an average of 5 women and 41 children die every day in Senegal. She added that this situation could be avoided and that the USG through USAID was helping Senegal preserve the lives of mothers and helping children survive thanks to a birth spacing program. The Ambassador asked the Caliph to support the program, which was summarized for him in the local Wolof language by Dr. Baye Mbow, a former doctor who now works for USAID and who designed the child spacing program. The Caliph was clearly engaged by the topic as he leaned forward and intervened directly in the discussion, rather than using his spokesperson. He acknowledged that Islam recommends a minimum of three years' spacing between children (beyond the two years mentioned in the briefing he received). The Caliph also said that child nutrition should be improved and insisted that hospitals and health centers should have enough equipment to do their work.

15. (SBU) Finally, the Ambassador highlighted her concerns about the rise of terrorism and narco-trafficking in West Africa, underlining that Senegal's southern region of the Casamance was particularly vulnerable because of its proximity with the two Guineas and a 28-year-old low intensity conflict that has seen a recent uptick in violence. Responding for the Caliph, Mame Mor said that while religious leaders generally intervened only in spiritual issues and matters of general interest, he conceded that foreigners in the region, such as drug traffickers, were a danger to peace, adding that certain legacies of the colonial period - such as artificial borders - did not help either. He averred that, in their view, the role of a religious leader was to educate people to become better citizens. He added that in the Casamance or other parts of the country religious leaders needed to teach citizens to balance their self-interest with the general interest, and that the Caliph would certainly play a role in trying to achieve this balance.

16. (SBU) Comment: It is difficult to overstate the level of influence of the Mouride caliph-general in Senegalese society. While the Mourides are not the largest Muslim brotherhood in Senegal (the largest group is the Tidjanes), they are the most economically and, therefore, politically powerful. Historically, they have remained aloof from politics, but have recently become more actively involved as a result of President Wade, who is a Mouride. Wade often sought and received the support of Bara Mbacke's predecessor, Serigne Saliou Mbacke. The President continues to attempt to curry favor with the head of the Mourides, recently offering land and state money to build a massive Mosque honoring Amadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism, on a site in the heart of Dakar. Since the death of Serigne Saliou Mbacke, many have speculated that the Mouride brotherhood's influence would begin to wane as a result of

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infighting within the Mouride hierarchy with the transition to the first leader who is not a son of the founder of the brotherhood, but the current Caliph appears to have kept the organization and its influence intact. Irrespective of the caliph-general's political influence or leanings, his opinion could have a dramatic impact on Senegalese attitudes toward ending child begging and family planning/child spacing. The Embassy will continue to elicit the support of this important religious community in our efforts to advance especially these issues. End comment.
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